DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 352 EA 017 850

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TITLE Helping Children with Behavior Problems (Through In-School Suspension).
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children (63rd, Anaheim, CA, April 15-19, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Antisocial Behavior; Behavior Change; Behavior Problems; Counseling; *Discipline; Discipline Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Problem Children; *Proctoring; Program Descriptions; *Rehabilitation; Remedial Instruction; Student Behavior; *Suspension; Tutoring
IDENTIFIERS *In School Suspension; Turn Around Program

ABSTRACT

This article describes an in-class suspension program in a junior high school, designed by the Turn Around Program (TAP) committee of the Myron J. Michael School (Kingston, New York). The committee developed a specific model to fit their needs, emphasizing reform rather than punishment. Suspended students received tutoring, remediation, and individual and group counseling daily in a restricted environment. Goals included helping students return to the mainstream population quickly and permanently, reducing contagious disruptive behavior, increasing self-awareness, and enhancing self-esteem. Other objectives included improving attitudes toward authority, recognizing personal strengths, improving personal deficits, taking responsibility for individual actions, and working out specific home problems. The brief program brought immediate overall benefits, though no systematic research was done and there were no experimental or control groups involved. The program has been re-funded, and presently two classes in two junior high schools are in operation. (Author/TE)

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Helping Children with Behavior Problems

(Through In-School Suspension)

CEC 1985

EA 017 850

Christopher G. Collins

The purpose of this article is to describe an in-class suspension program used in a junior high school. The author did not create this program. He was employed to implement this particular model which was originally designed by the TAP Committee of the Myron J. Michael School, Kingston, New York 12401.

That committee developed a specific model to fit their local needs with an emphasis on reform rather than punishment. A brief outline of that program is available from them free of charge upon request.

Although the program was brief there were immediate overall benefits. No actual research study was done and there were no experimental or control groups involved. Despite this, the program has been re-funded and as of this date two classes in two of their junior high schools are in operation.

The conclusions in this article are solely those of the author and he takes full responsibility for them. In addition, further research would have to be undertaken before any generalizations could be made.

A series of workshops on "problem-solving models" was attended by teachers and administrators who developed this program. Afterward they attempted a practical application of these models to overcome specific recurring problems in their schools. They were seeking alternatives to problems like traditional out-of-school suspensions that were punitive and non-productive. The result was the development of an in-school suspension program called the Turn Around Program or TAP. Their idea was to "turn the student around" from a disruptive troublemaker to a more socially integrated person.

TAP was designed to be a personal and meaningful learning experience for suspended students. They were to receive tutoring, remediation and individual and group counseling daily in a restricted environment. Priorities were improving academic skills and social behavior. Goals included helping students return to the mainstream population quickly and permanently, minimalizing contagious disruptive behavior, increasing self-awareness and enhancing self-esteem. Other objectives were improving attitudes toward authority, recognizing and improving personal strengths and deficits, taking responsibility for individual actions and working out specific home problems. Efforts aimed at reform rather than punishment.

Although the student was the focus, staff members members were consulted about actions that elicited negative behavior in students. Furthermore, techniques for handling large groups, creating stimulating classroom environments and shaping positive behavior were explored.

Admission criteria included disruptive behavior, chronic school problems, truancy, negative attitudes toward authority and other actions that routinely lead to out-of-school suspensions.

A maximum of ten students was admitted at one time and new students were admitted as space became available. As the TAP teacher/counselor I was dually certified in special education, elementary and secondary education with training in individual and small group counseling. An aide was employed and both of us had a duty-free lunch period. In addition, we had one preparation period daily.

Intake procedures required a meeting of TAP participants: an administrator, TAP teacher, the student, and the student's parent(s). At the meeting we discussed the reasons for the student's suspension, explained the TAP program and recommended it as a more appropriate placement rather than "dumping the student on the parents for three to five days on home suspension. Upon agreement, we all signed a contract. It established guidelines for a minimum suspension period which could be extended or terminated, academic and social requirements and participation of both student and parent(s) in individual and group counseling. There was no objection to counseling by any parent when the significance of these sessions was carefully explained.

After everyone signed the contract the student officially entered the TAP program. The parent(s), free to leave, often expressed relief that their child was remaining behind in a supportive program. The attendance office was notified about the transfer, the student's papers and books were collected and teachers were requested to forward work

with new assignments for the next three to five days. The student proceeded to the self-contained TAP classroom to meet everybody and begin an unusual school day.

The student received first day orientation which explored posted rules, procedures, work areas and assignments. To assure continuity we used a schedule similar to the school standard but tailored to meet TAP guidelines. The schedule included homeroom time, attendance procedures, academic time blocks, counseling sessions and all other activities in the room. After homeroom, the student remained in the TAP classroom for the day rather than change classrooms. If possible, an individual or group counseling session was held immediately after homeroom. A final counseling session was held during the last period to close out the day. Student presence and participation in counseling sessions was mandatory and emergency sessions were held when needed.

During counseling sessions the emphasis was on problem solving, narrowing down complaints, establishing priorities, focusing on desirable changes, exploring behavior (motivation, patterns, peer influence), feelings (anger, resentment, self-esteem), attitudes toward authority and family problems. Empathic listening, a strong motivating technique, evoked participation by students. Appropriate behavior was usually sustained in all areas of the TAP program. But outbursts and behavior considered unacceptable in the normal routine were accepted in counseling sessions if it had therapeutic value.

When parents weren't available for counseling, a significant family member (older brother, sister, uncle) usually was. Honest expression of

feelings was encouraged and criticism and value judgements were avoided. Careful observations were made of parent-child interaction for clues to problems. Significant family issues were probed carefully to reveal factors that influenced the student's behavior in school. Our approach remained non-didactic and non-judgemental. Parents were treated as authority figures without being patronized. At no time were sides taken between a parent and child. Non-directive techniques were employed in problem solving, although both parent and student were urged to share responsibility for resolving issues.

Academic scheduling, though flexible, was equally structured into the program. Assignments involved one-on-one tutoring and remediation. Specific notes were made on a student's deficits, likes and dislikes. Although emphasizing remediation of deficits it was not at the expense of the student's assets. The purpose was to mainstream the students quickly and this emphasis facilitated my goals. This was especially true if the deficits were a major contributer to the student's initial suspension.

All time periods accommodated our needs but generally conformed to the school standard. All assignments required completion either in school or at home and quality was always expected and received. If crises or emotional problems were interfering factors they were given priority attention but never used to avoid work or submit poor quality.

Lunch and breaks were included and all free time or recreational time was a contingency for work done and behavior levels obtained. Good quality work, appropriate behavior and cooperation were factors in

earning the privilege of mainstreaming. Poor quality work, inappropriate behavior and non-cooperation were factors in delaying mainstreaming and extending the in-class suspension time and intensifying the TAP process.

After the suspension period was completed, all TAP participants met again to determine the student's placement. Based on an overall evaluation, either the student was immediately mainstreamed or readmitted to the TAP program. At this meeting, we encouraged parent and student participation, sought their opinions, explored the program's effects and discussed the student's potential and the options available to avoid future suspensions. For a recalcitrant or severely troubled student, we offered alternatives (i.e., referral and evaluation for special classes, counseling, family therapy, contact with community mental health agencies, contact with family court and/or probation and in cases of child abuse parents anonymous and/or foster care.

At no time were demands or threats made. We only offered suggestions. Blame was never attributed to any one person. We maintained some objectivity by remaining non-judgemental. We avoided stereotype examples of contributive factors--the single-parent family, the overbearing mother, the absent father, the alcoholic father, the slow learner and the socio-economic condition--since these had often been overemphasized in the past. But, if any such factor was a predominant influence, and if something could be done about it then that course of action was pursued. Personality conflicts between a teacher and a student were not a predominant influence but were considerations.

For mainstreamed students, post-evaluation forms were sent to all the student's teachers. These forms were designed to evaluate student adjustment to, and performance in, regular classes after a minimum attendance of five school days. If, instead of mainstreaming, the student's suspension time was extended, the TAP process was repeated with an increased emphasis on parent participation and a stronger focus on the primary problems interfering with mainstreaming.

Due to unavoidable factors, the TAP program ran for only twenty-two full school days. But, in those twenty-two days, eleven students completed our program. Three of these students repeated the program. Total student daily attendance amounted to fifty-one school days with an average of 4.6 in-class suspension days per student. We had <u>one hundred percent</u> attendance. Only one student cut four hours but this time was made up later on. This attendance level is important regarding financial aid, educational psychology and overall quality education. If these students were on home suspension there would have been fifty-one days of absenteeism. Furthermore, passing the problem back to the parents would have been ineffective.

Another prominent factor was that <u>all</u> families participated. They were actively cooperative, especially when a parent was called in three or more times. Consequently, many problems were solved and accommodations were made on everybody's part under better emotional conditions. Family contact was made even when things went well. This created a positive connection between the school and the home in contrast to a past history of negative contact like calling home only when the student was misbehaving. Afterward, some parents voluntarily contacted the school to check up on

their child and to voice their concerns. They felt comfortable enough to seek advice after having developed more trust with us because of their experience with the TAP program.

There were other payoffs. Work was received on a daily basis from all teachers, assignments were kept up, all quizzes and tests were taken and intensive one-on-one tutoring and remediation served to bring students up-to-date to help students from falling behind in their grades. This occurred despite the disparity of academic levels. In contrast, when the student was on home suspension, work was often incomplete or not done at all. Some students lagged academically. They missed quizzes and tests. Their grades were not helped by their absences from class. The TAP program made attempts to break this cycle.

In counseling sessions, students learned techniques to avoid open conflict with the staff. Participation by their parents not only shocked the students but often resulted in a more productive dialogue where previously little existed. The students learned by exploring their own attention seeking devices and manipulations of staff members. They also learned negotiation and conciliation tactics. Attempts were made to help them like themselves more, to accept who they were (children with problems, not problem children) and to be more socially acceptable by getting involved with their peers constructively.

The work day was long and strenuous. There were no study halls, no gym classes and only limited amounts of free time. The emphasis was on growth, trust and self-improvement through structure, support and accomplishment. The environment was serious and intense yet flexible and

humorous. The students role-played and experienced alternative situations. They worked and produced. This system of reform, rather than punishments, eased tensions.

Starting the school day with counseling sessions worked out troubled feelings left over from the night or weekend before. Working out these angry, disturbing feelings before tutoring and remediation began, decreased resistance to work and conflict with staff considerably.

The program did have repeaters but repeating did not necessarily indicate failure. Repeating may have indicated: intervention that was too little or too late, severe maturational deficits, inappropriate placement or insufficient time in the program initially. Furthermore, some students were too troubled emotionally and required help beyond the scope of our program. Some needed extensive psychotherapy, contact with the family court system and/or continuous ongoing care. Consequently, we exposed these factors where they existed and tried to find alternatives if our program proved inadequate.

We felt more effective with students who had a supportive family, only skipped classes periodically and could manage themselves with some supplementary help. We felt least effective with students who were deeply troubled, chronically truant and whose families suffered from severe emotional crises and chaotic or abusive conditions. We were least effective with students who repeated the same grade more than once and who were older than their peers by two years or more. Follow-up counseling sessions with parents and students proved to be very effective in maintaining student self-control.

Due to the brief length of the program, conclusions about significant effects and long term effects could not be determined. Despite this, the program did have immediate effects producing some hoped for results. Consequently, a second in-school suspension class has been established in another junior high school in the district.